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TAGS: PREL PGOV ZI

SUBJECT: THE MDC VIEW OF THE MBEKI TALKS

REF: A) PRETORIA 2209 B) HARARE 552

Classified By: Ambassador Christopher Dell under Section 1.4 b/d

Summary

11. (C) Tendai Biti, secretary-general of the MDC anti-Senate faction, told Poleconchief July 11 that South African mediators were furious that ZANU-PF negotiators had failed to travel to South Africa last week for SADC-sponsored talks under the auspices of South African president Thabo Mbeki. Biti and fellow MDC negotiator Welshman Ncube took advantage of the absence of the ZANU-PF representatives to brief the South Africans on what they see as the GOZ's efforts to avoid a negotiated resolution to the Zimbabwean crisis. Biti was cautiously optimistic about the talks. He believed Mbeki was determined to broker an agreement and that his mediation team was informed and capable. Despite the MDC split, he and Ncube were working well together in the negotiation process. The MDC was preparing for elections, but absent an agreement resulting in a level electoral playing field, the MDC was prepared to boycott the election and take to the streets.
End Summary.

South Africans Steamed

12. (C) Biti and Ncube traveled to South Africa last week to engage in the next round of talks following agreement on an agenda in mid-June (Ref A). According to Biti, the South African mediation team (Local Government minister Sydney Mufamadi, Director General in the Presidency Reverend Frank Chikane, and legal advisor Mujanku Gumbi) was furious when

ZANU-PF negotiators Justice minister Patrick Chinimasa and Labor minister Nicholas Goche failed to travel to South Africa without forewarning them. He said their was a silver lining, however, to their absence--he and Ncube had ample time to relate their perceptions of ZANU-PF's positions and negotiating strategy.

¶13. (C) Biti and Ncube told the South Africans that Mugabe and ZANU-PF were in denial about the existence of a crisis. ZANU-PF regarded the MDC as puppets of the U.S. and UK and were not prepared to deal with them as equals. They engaged in the talks because South Africa was one of their few friends and they did not wish to offend that country. Biti also emphasized to his interlocutors that Mugabe considered Mbeki a junior partner, intimating that he could be manipulated.

¶14. (C) Biti said he and Ncube next outlined what he saw as the ZANU-PF strategy. They thought ZANU-PF would try to drag out the negotiations while at the same time preparing to introduce and pass Constitutional Amendment 18 (Ref B) which would solidify ZANU-PF's grip on parliament and facilitate its perpetuation of power. (Note: Parliament is due to consider Amendment 18 when it reconvenes on July 24. End Note.) Proof of ZANU-PFs lack of sincerity was recent speeches by Mugabe and Vice-President Msika arguing that a new constitution was unnecessary--this after the ZANU-PF and MDC negotiators agreed last month that a new constitution should be the top agenda item (Ref A). Ultimately, Biti thought that ZANU-PF might pull out of the negotiations, blaming lack of progress on the MDC and/or the South Africans, or they might attempt to get the MDC to sign a

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meaningless agreement. Biti and Ncube concluded by telling the South Africans directly that Mugabe was "playing" them and that they needed to come up with a strategy to get ZANU-PF to negotiate meaningfully.

Cautious Optimism

¶15. (C) Unlike in years past when Biti thought the South African goal was a reformed ZANU-PF government, he told us he now thought Mbeki was genuinely seeking constitutional reform permitting a fair election. He believed Mbeki did not want the negotiations to fail, realizing that it could negatively affect his legacy. According to Biti, Mbeki, in a meeting with both sides on June 18, had bluntly told them that Zimbabwe was in a crisis that needed to be resolved for the sake of Zimbabwe and for the region as a whole. The following day, Mufamadi "hit the roof" after reviewing ZANU-PF's position paper on negotiations which declared the land dispute between the UK and Zimbabwe should be the primary focus, attacked the MDC as puppets of the West, and criticized sanctions while ignoring issues of constitutional and electoral reform. The South Africans were subsequently able to mediate an agenda, viewed favorably by the MDC, focusing on reforms. (Ref A).

¶16. (C) Tempering optimism with realism, Biti said he knew ZANU-PF would have to be dragged to a good agreement. And noting the importance Mbeki placed in arriving at an agreement, he acknowledged that it would be up to the MDC negotiators to press Mbeki and his team to come to a good resolution.

¶16. (C) Biti said he and Ncube had confidence in Mbeki's mediation team and thought Mbeki's point person, Mufamadi, was informed and capable, albeit low key. Despite the split between MDC factions, he and Ncube were working well together.

And if Optimism is Misplaced...

¶7. (C) The MDC, according to Biti, was actively preparing for elections. He pointed to large crowds that have attended Tsvingirai-led rallies in the last couple of weeks.

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Nevertheless, participation in the scheduled elections was dependent on a level electoral playing field. The MDC's ultimate weapon was the "delegitimization" of the election. Biti maintained that the MDC would abandon its electoral campaign and take to the streets if a fair election were not possible.

Comment

¶8. (C) Although an agreement was reached in mid-June to put constitutional and electoral reform on the negotiating agenda (Ref A), Mugabe and Vice-President Msika have since given speeches declaring a new constitution unnecessary--amending the current constitution in their eyes is sufficient. Further, Amendment 18, introduced by the GOZ, will be taken up when Parliament reconvenes on July 24. GOZ persistence in debating and adopting this amendment would be evidence that ZANU-PF does not take the talks seriously.

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¶9. (C) With regard to the talks, critical questions are whether Biti is right that Mbeki is determined to forge an agreement and whether the South African president is prepared to take necessary measures, such as public criticism of ZANU-PF's negotiating role or the threat to withhold approval of an unfair election, to force Mugabe's hand. Even with strong intervention from Mbeki, however, Mugabe seems bent on continuing his destructive policies, and we have serious doubts whether he will sign an agreement leading to democratic reform and permitting fair elections.

DELL